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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Agricultural Research Service
Production Economics Research Branch

SUMMARY OF PROSPECTS FOR REDUCING THE NEED FOR MIGRATORY FARM WORK

O. J. Scoville, Production Economics Research Branch
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to representatives of National Council of Churches
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This conference has been concerned with the question, "Must we continue agricultural methods that require use of migrants?" The significant facts and opinions bearing on this question are summarized below:

(1) Prospective requirements for agricultural production and changes in supply over the next 20 years: U. S. population in 1975 is expected to be about a third greater than in 1951-53. It is estimated that under assumed conditions of a high level of economic activity, per capita demand might increase by about 10 percent for agricultural products. Increased production to meet increased demand will come largely from increases in yields. Considering availability of land, it is estimated that there may be an increase of about 6 percent in the acreage of cropland by 1975.

With respect to crops that are of most importance to migrant labor, the following observations are made: Cotton. Production needs in 1975 probably can be met with little change from the 1955 acreage level. Truck crops. With attainable yields, a relatively small increase in acreage likely will be needed. Fruits. Probably some increase in acreage will be needed, but in view of attainable yields, it will be much smaller than the increase in production. Potatoes. Production needs for 1975 could be met with a smaller acreage than was grown in 1951-53. Sugar beets. Policy regarding importation of sugar will be the decisive factor on sugar beet acreages.

Considering prospective trends in production and ignoring effects of improvements in mechanization, there would be a moderate increase in demand for



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migrants for work in cotton and potatoes and a more substantial increase in demand for migrants for work in truck crops and fruits.

(2) Prospects for technological changes. Sugar beets. With recent advances in the breeding of mono-germ seed, prospects are good for further mechanization of spring work and substantial reduction in requirements for migrant labor. Cotton. Development of chemical weed killers makes it possible to reduce hoeing drastically. This will lend further encouragement to the use of mechanical pickers. While we have the technical know-how to mechanize cotton production, wages hold the key to the choice between mechanical and hand methods. The small acreages of cotton on many farms also will be a deterrent to complete mechanization of this crop. Potatoes. Encouraging progress is being made on potato harvesters which may reduce materially for hand labor in potato picking. Vegetables and fruits. Progress in mechanization of these crops is spotty. In general, more progress has been made in mechanizing operations in packingsheds than fields. However, substantial progress is being made in mechanizing the harvest operations for peas, sweet corn, and beans for processing, such root crops as radishes and carrots, and a few other vegetables.

In summary, it appears that although substantial progress is being made in mechanizing jobs formerly done by migrant labor, much remains to be done and heavy demands for migrant labor will continue for many years to come. It must be kept in mind that technological developments sometimes aggravate seasonality of employment. This has happened in the past. For example, the partial mechanization of sugar beet work in some areas led to the displacement of resident seasonal workers and to increased demand for migrant workers for the tasks that had been left unmechanized. Even after successful machines are developed, the cost of these machines sometimes makes it unprofitable for some farmers to discontinue use of hand methods.

(3) Effect of the changing structure of agriculture on demand for migrants. The number of farms has been declining for many years. The farms that remain are still predominantly family farms but they are larger, more highly mechanized, and more specialized. From 1940 to 1950 and from 1950 to 1954, the number of farms dropped about 10 percent, according to the census. Farms reporting chickens dropped 18 percent from 1940 to 1950, and 19 percent from 1950 to 1954. Farms reporting cows milked declined 12 percent and 19 percent in the respective periods. As a result of increased specialization, seasonal labor-intensive enterprises are larger on many farms. When supplementary dairy and poultry enterprises are dropped, the seasonality of work on these farms is increased.

As a result of improvements in transportation, marketing, and processing facilities, there is more regional specialization in production. As a result fruit and vegetable crops can be grown where production conditions are best. This increases the volume of seasonal labor needed in these specialized areas.

In the United States, agriculture is declining relative to other industries. If agriculture is to be healthy, there must be a steady stream of people leaving farms and going into other economic activities. The total number of farmworkers has declined with some interruptions since 1916. This decrease has affected both family and hired workers, but there has been no great change in the ratio of hired and family workers.

While demand for seasonal labor has stayed up, the supply of local seasonal workers has declined. Local area studies made by the Production Economics Research Branch, Agricultural Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, and the Bureau of Employment Security, U. S. Department of Labor, in selected cotton areas indicate that the supply of adult male seasonal workers has declined sharply in many of these areas. Studies of unemployed rural people in other areas indicate that a rather small proportion of these



people are seeking farm employment. In a recent West Virginia area, about 90 percent of the rural people available for work preferred nonfarm employment.

Some local seasonal jobs have been taken over by migrants. These migrants are a transitory group. Many of the workers drop out of migratory streams and others come in from low-income farming areas. In recent years, the supply of migratory labor has been augmented by Mexican Nationals. In 1955, about 400,000 Mexican Nationals came into the United States for farm-work. They were employed in 27 States. A few migrants also came from Canada, Puerto Rico, and other countries or territories.

(4) Status of farmworkers. In connection with efforts to reduce the seasonality of farm employment, it should be kept in mind that we do not have a tradition of maintaining year-round employment for farmworkers. In some countries, the year-round farmworker has more status than he has in this country, and farm employers make a conscious effort to provide year-round employment. The year-round farmworker in this country is usually a person who does not intend to stay in the farm-labor market for more than a few years.

(5) General conclusions. Changes in technology and the changing structure of agriculture are closely interrelated. Technology has changed the structure of agriculture, and the structure of agriculture has influenced the changes made in technology. The net effect of these two forces will be a tendency for family farms to become larger. They will still be family farms in the sense of primary dependence on family labor. Seasonality will continue to be a characteristic of our agriculture. Technology will tend to reduce labor peaks, but at times it will aggravate them. With high-level industrial employment and the resultant drain on local sources of seasonal labor, the need for migrants will continue to be strong and there will be continued demand for foreign migrant workers. With a lower level of



industrial employment, the supply of local seasonal workers would be greater and the demand for migrants would be less. For a good many years to come, the major migratory labor problems will be: (a) How to improve the welfare of migrant workers; (b) how to improve the earnings of migrants; and (c) the social and economic problems associated with the importation of foreign farm labor.



